DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 279 792 CE 046 365

AUTHOR Fox, Michael
TITLE A Look at Illiteracy in America Today--The Problem, the Solutions, the Alternatives.
INSTITUTION Push Literacy Action Now, Inc., Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 1 Jul 86
NOTE 31p.
AVAILABLE FROM PLAN, Inc., 1332 G Street, SE, Washington, DC 20003 ($6.25).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; *Adult Literacy; *Adult Programs; *Illiteracy; *Literacy Education; *Program Design; Program Development

ABSTRACT

Literacy should be viewed as a continuum of undereducation, stretching from those who cannot read and write at all at the low end to those who have less than a high school education at the high end. People at different points have different needs, which may differ greatly from those current literacy programs try to meet. The track record of existing literacy programs is weak. Outcome data are often unavailable; existing data show the vast majority of educationally disadvantaged adults are not being reached by programs and the people in programs do not stay in them. Instead of generalized assistance in learning to read, people want specific strategies to deal with specific self-defined problems. They rely on helping networks within the community, not on reading tutors or school-based programs. A "literacy support program" offering a range of services and learner-oriented assistance is probably a more viable model than a reading program staffed by volunteers. Also important is a learner-oriented approach. Four recommendations that address the problem of illiteracy are the following: parent-child programs to halt intergenerational transmission of illiteracy, use of networks and helping services, making materials more readable, and organizing for a working literacy. (YLB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Push Literacy Action Now

ED279792

A LOOK AT ILLITERACY IN AMERICA TODAY --

THE PROBLEM, THE SOLUTIONS, THE ALTERNATIVES

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

M Fox

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Michael Fox

Washington DC
July 1, 1986

1332 G Street SE • Washington DC 20003 • (202) 547-8903

CE044365

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ACKNOWLDEGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for explaining to me what I really intended to say--but didn't.

First, my associate, **Marcia Harrington**, for long and thoughtful discussions and for some of the writing.

Also, to **Kamer Davis** who gave technical assistance, and whose editorial judgment and skill turned my ideas into well-crafted prose.

Thanks also to the volunteer staff of The Ladder -- **Pat Gatlin, Penn and Brenda Szittya**, and **Cathy Baker** -- whose stories provided many of the ideas used in this paper.

I am grateful to **Peter Gerber** of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation whose search for alternative perspectives on adult literacy made this paper possible, and to the Foundation for its financial support in making it a reality.

Finally, a special thanks to all of PLAN's students and volunteers, who through the years have had a lot to say.

copyright © 1986
PLAN, Inc.

$6.25

ERRATA: p. 11, paragraph 3 - citation should read: "Thompson" (1983)"

SUMMARY

Current rhetoric about America's "illiteracy problem" is misleading, suggesting that the problem is larger than it is (that , for example, there are tens of millions of American adults who cannot read well enough to perform basic tasks like taking a bus across town or comprehending a social security form) and simpler than it is (that the baseline problem of all these people is that they lack reading, writing and computing skills) and easier to solve than it is (that what we need to do is to publicize the availability of literacy services and get people in programs that will teach them to read. Once they can read, their -- and society's -- problem will be solved).

In reality, literacy should be viewed as a continuum of undereducation, stretching from those who cannot read and write at all at the low end to those who have less than a high school education at the high end. Particularly at the low end of the continuum, low literacy cannot be isolated from a number of other factors -- poverty, unemployment, welfare dependency, racial discrimination. It is unrealistic to assume that teaching someone to read will help that person get off welfare, find a job, or even read government forms better if forms continue to be written in multi-syllable bureaucratese.

The fact is that people at different points along the continuum have different needs, which may differ greatly from the needs current literacy programs are trying to meet. I say "may" because there are at this point virtually no national data to indicate how people are spread out along the literacy continuum or how they view their own functioning and needs. How many people are there who can't read and write at all? Who read at a second or third or fourth or sixth grade level? Who actually can't decipher labels or bus signs? Who have difficulty functioning not so much in ways defined by middle class researchers but in ways that have meaning and relevance to their own lives? We don't know.

We do know that the track record of existing literacy programs is not strong. In many instances, outcome data are unavailable; when they do exist they show that the vast majority of educationally disadvantaged adults are not being reached by programs, and that the people in the programs do not stay in the programs.

There are also indications that simply"teaching people to read" may not be the most useful way to deal with low literacy. People tend to want specific strategies to deal with specific self-defined problems, not generalized assistance in learning to encode and decode written language. And they tend to rely on helping networks within the community to assist them, not on reading tutors or school-based programs. (In fact, school is possibly the last place a person with a history of failure and alienation in an academic environment will choose to go.) A "literacy support program" offering a

range of services and learner-oriented assistance is probably a much more viable model than a reading program staffed by volunteers with a "degree in caring."

It's also important that literacy programs orient themselves to meet the needs of learners, rather than to teach non-readers and low-level readers to jump through a series of pre-defined, pre-programmed literacy hoops. Programs taking a learner-oriented approach involve learners in decisionmaking on instructional objectives and approach and provide a range of materials geared to the interests and needs of their learners.

The paper concludes with four recommendations for things that can and should be done in seeking to address the problem of illiteracy. They are:

1. *Parent-child programs to halt intergenerational transmission of illiteracy.* Children who grow up in a world of books and reading tend to become good readers. Those who grow up without family support for reading do not. To avoid continuing to transmit low literacy from generation to generation we must reach the children --and must do it though their parents or other key family members. Parent-child literacy programs are now being run by a few community-oriented literacy groups, and they are not a pie-in-the-sky idea, but rather a highly workable approach to reaching two generations at once.

2. *Use of networks and helping services.* There are many helping services that can be provided using existing public and private community services, networks and opportunities. Creating self-help groups, using volunteers to provide reading and help in a "literacy crisis", and reaching out to parents whose children are having problems in school are just a few examples of what can be done.

3. *Making materials more readable.* When someone can't read a social services form written in bureaucratese, perhaps the problem is as much with the form as with the reader. Illiteracy is determined, in part, by the level at which materials are written. Advocacy by "watchdog" groups of volunteers who monitor the readability of public information is a viable strategy that local literacy organizations and community based organizations can consider. At the national level a "write to read" program should be considered that would distribute "how to" information, provide training, and promote the importance of readability.

4. *Organizing for a working literacy.* There are a number of experienced educators, trainers, advocates and visionaries -- as well as learners -- who have over the past several years attempted to think through the problem of illiteracy and come up with solutions that work. Unfortunately, most of these people are not in the "mainstream" of Adult Basic Education and volunteer literacy programs, and thus have not been included in the coalitions and crusades recently set up to promote literacy. It could be very helpful to bring some of these people together to focus jointly on solutions,

even at the risk of challenging the status-quo. We have heard long enough that America needs to know how to read and America will learn how to read if we just increase the number of voluntary programs and volunteers in our communities, workplaces, prisons and schools. There are other dimensions to the picture, and they need to be explored, talked about, written about and known.

LITERACY OVERVIEW: HOW YOU UNDERSTAND THE PROBLEM DETERMINES THE SOLUTION

WHAT IS THE PHENOMENON WE'RE TALKING ABOUT?

One of the great difficulties in attempting to address the issue of adult illiteracy in the United States is to come to a clear understanding of the problem itself. In many less developed nations the problem is relatively clear-cut: a given percentage of the adult population have been given little opportunity to learn to read, write and compute. But the United States has 12-year school systems, publicly funded adult education programs, and more. At one point -- and not too many years back -- we congratulated ourselves on having a 95 percent literacy rate. What's going on here?

Adding up the numbers. First of all, it should be said that something *is*, certainly, going on. Various studies and surveys have determined that there are between 50 and 70 million Americans 17 and older considered to be educationally disadvantaged. The category educationally disadvantaged generally refers to those adults who have not completed high school. And attempts have been made to further break this category down into illiterate, functionally illiterate or marginally literate adults.

Despite some rather arbitrary approaches to "counting the numbers" and some questionable definitions of literacy, these studies *do* show:

- that 23 million adults *cannot* perform such tasks as reading a paycheck stub, filling out a W-4 form, addressing an envelope or reading an equal opportunity announcement. An additional 34 million have some difficulty in performing the same tasks. (1975 Adult Performance Level Study conducted by the University of Texas)

- that 38% of the population 16 and over (some 50 to 70 million adults) have not completed high school. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Center for Education Statistics, and others)

- that 15% of the adult population cannot answer questions about a classified section of the newspaper, the color of their eyes and how long they've lived at their address. (Harris Survey, 1971)

- that 13% of American adults cannot answer 20 of 26 multiple-choice questions on a test originally designed to measure whether non-native speakers could read passages drawn from various forms used by U.S. social service agencies. (US Department of Education & the Census Bureau, 1986)

A literacy continuum. From these data we can begin to see that tens of millions of Americans are in *some way* educationally disadvantaged and fall *somewhere* on a continuum. The continuum ranges from the illiterate who cannot read or write at all, to the functionally illiterate who are unable to "function" or "cope" in certain socially accepted ways as defined by the researchers, to those who are marginally literate -- that is, have not graduated from high school but are able to "pass" the functional tests. The data also show that those who fall on the continuum are concentrated among the poor, the unemployed, the imprisoned and among racial and ethnic minorities.

What the numbers don't show. But data like these do not tell us much about the nature and extent of literacy *as a problem*, either for the individuals who are themselves educationally disadvantaged or for society as a whole. What we don't know, and none of the studies thus far have shown us, is:

- How well those who "flunk" a pen-and-pencil functional skills test normed to reflect "external" middle-class standards of competence actually function in their own environments according to their own "internal" standards.

- Whether or not, and in what percentages, adults who have not completed a particular grade in school or scored at a certain level on functional tests are illiterate, functionally illiterate or marginally literate according to either external or internal standards.

We do not know, in other words, whether the inability to read a classified ad makes one less apt to find a job, or whether the inability to read bureaucratese limits access to social services. We do not know what literacy or lack of literacy *means* within a particular situation or context.

Part of the difficulty in defining the adult literacy problem is that low literacy is not an isolated phenomenon, a problem in itself. People who are undereducated or lack reading and writing skills are concentrated among the poor, the unemployed, the imprisoned, among racial and ethnic minorities and women. Being undereducated is "one factor interacting with many others, such as class, race and sex discrimination, welfare dependency, unemployment, poor housing and a general sense of powerlessness." (Hunter, 1979)

Using the numbers. But literacy *is* being seen as a problem in itself, by a number of people who have interpreted the available data as indicating an overwhelming need for a nationwide literacy crusade. The numbers themselves have been used irresponsibly, to indicate, for example, that:

- "Illiteracy weakens the US defense posture because it affects the recruiting base ... it affects our country's ability to compete in foreign

trade ... it is one explanation for poor voting turn-out ... its costs to society range from $100 billion to $220 billion a year." (ABC/PBS "PLUS" press announcement)

- "23 million Americans have reading problems so serious that they have difficulty in competently handling the minimal demands of daily living." (U.S. Dept. of Education *National Adult Literacy Project Overview*)

- 72 million essentially nonliterate people ... that results inlower productivity, poor product quality, lost management and supervisory time and restricted mobility and promotability of employees ... that costs the corporate world and the nation billions of dollars a year." (Business Council for Effective Literacy Newsletter, 9/84)

- "27 million Americans can't read and guess who pays the price -- the top 120 US corporations. ...By the year 2000, two out of three Americans could be illiterate. ... There's an epidemic, with 27 million victims and no visible symptoms ..." (Coalition for Literacy/ Ad Council awareness materials)

- "(23 million Americans) cannot read, write, reckon and reason well enough to solve problems, to make sensible decisions or to make reasonable judgments in the fast-changing, high technology of America in the 1980s." (Barbara Bush, op-ed article, *Washington Post*)

Statements like these make good copy for newpaper articles, good rhetoric for politicians, and good arguments for program managers eager to increase their program budgets. But they don't shed much light on the real situation.

Behind the numbers -- serious questions. To question and challenge (as I do in this paper) the ways in which "illiterates" have been counted, how literacy has been defined, how study results have been used, and how the country is responding to its so-called "literacy crisis" -- none of this is to suggest that there are not millions of educationally disadvantaged adults in this country and that they do not need our attention.

It is rather to emphasize that the data tell us very little about exactly where these millions of people fall on the illiteracy-literacy continuum, what their needs are, and what types of services would best help them. To describe the basic problem all along the continuum as *lack of reading and writing skills* (1) oversimplifies a complex problem and (2) tends to suggest solutions based on the notion of "helping people learn to read." Alternative ways of looking at the "problem" can lead to quite different solutions.

WHAT ABOUT CURRENT EFFORTS?

Although I take issue with the current hoopla about literacy crusades, this is not to say that there aren't a vast number of caring, hard-working professionals, volunteers, learners and others in the literacy effort trying to provide badly needed services to adults who need them and making some significant gains in awakening this country to major social conditions that demand our attention.

At the national level the Department of Education's Adult Literacy Initiative has "officially" brought adult illiteracy to the attention of the nation. The Coalition for Literacy has for the first time brought together representatives from professional and voluntary organizations to plan an "attack" on illiteracy and provide an 800 number to recruit resources, volunteers and potential learners. The Business Council for Effective Literacy has managed to get the message across to the corporate world that resources are needed. A number of firms have responded with generous contributions.

At the state and local level governors, mayors, wardens, politicians and hard-working volunteers have shown that they do care, want to do something, and are willing to try.

But is all this well-meant activity having any effect? The answer, unfortunately, is "It's hard to say, but from all indications, no."

The rhetoric of awareness. Public awareness campaigns are being conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, the Coalition for Literacy, the Business Council for Effective Literacy, ABC/PBS' Project Literacy U.S. (PLUS), the national offices and affiliates of Laubach Literacy Action and the Literacy Volunteers of America. There are several state and local initiatives as well. The message being sent by all of these groups misrepresents the "illiterate" and "illiteracy" and misleads the public. The basic message underlying the campaign rhetoric is this:

- *There are 20 - 40 - 60 - or more - millions of adults hidden somewhere in this country who cannot read street signs, get across town on a bus, fill out a job application, or "function" in a number of other ways.*

- *Their inability to read causes poverty, crime, unemployment, welfare dependency, and loss of productivity for American business.*

- *The solution, for the individual and the country, is for the millions to learn how to read.*

- *There is a "safety net" in the country in the form of adult basic education (ABE) and voluntary literacy programs that can teach them how to read.*

- *The threads (programs, resources and volunteers) of the "safety net" need to be increased and more closely knit..*

- *The federal initiative, voluntary coalition, business council, and two national literacy groups , with the help of the media, will do the knitting.*

- *Outcomes can only be positive.*

The reality behind the rhetoric is very different:

- There is a "literacy continuum" along which are found people who cannot read, people who find themselves functionally handicapped by their lack of reading skill, people who do not find themselves so handicapped (although middle class researchers might disagree), people who do not read as well as others, but can generally get by, and people who never finished high school (who may fall into one of the other categories).

- While these people are typically found among the poor, minorities, the unemployed, the imprisoned and those on welfare there is no evidence of a cause-effect relationship -- simply a correlation.

- While professionals, politicians and journalists believe that the solution for these people's problems is to learn to read, they have not asked the educationally disadvantaged what *they* see as solutions for *themselves*..

- The "safety net" of national literacy programs has some very big gaps--

  - The total number of educationally disadvantaged adults "caught" in the net each year by *all* programs does not exceed 5,000,000.

  - 40 to 50 percent of these people slip through the net (drop out) in six months to a year's time -- too little to make any significant learning gains.

  - Those caught tend not to be representative of the educationally disadvantaged population as a whole. More than 50 percent are *not* on welfare, unemployed, minority, or at the lower end of the illiteracy-literacy continuum.

- There is little data to back up claims of "positive outcomes" from these programs. In fact (as is discussed below) there is very little data at all, and what there is is not encouraging.

No proof that anything's happening. Study after study, year after year, the country has been told that our approach to adult education in general, and adult literacy in particular, has been a failure -- or at a minimum, that there is little proof of success. Most of those who are making claims of having programs, methods and materials that work have not been held accountable for such claims. Harman and Hunter (1979), for example, evaluated various categories of adult education and adult literacy programs and commented:

> *One thing is apparent: publicly proclaimed program goals and actual achievements are far apart.*

The many claims of "touching and reaching" the lives of people are not backed up by proof that people are learning to read. According to Wurzbacher, who made a study of five U.S. and one Canadian Laubach program, the simple, direct lesson is that:

> *Do-gooders must learn to do better.*

McGrail (1984), in a summary of existing data on literacy programs, concluded that:

> *It is not possible to provide a complete and accurate picture of literacy programs in the 1980s using existing data. Most of the needed information is not available.*

McCune (1984) found much the same situation:

> *(We don't know) who is delivering these programs, what they do, how many are being served, how well they work, what unmet needs they might have., Student data are equally short in supply. (We don't know) levels of performance, rate of growth and benefits (students) derive from various instructional approaches.*

When data *are* available, in program after program the same results are evident: a high dropout rate, a low progress rate, and a lot of disappointed people.

SO WHAT'S WRONG?

The basic premise of most literacy programs is simplistic. The mistake made consistently over the years by educators and literacy workers is to view illiteracy and other educational disadvantages as educational problems, solvable by simply "teaching people how to read". This mind set has led us through a period of programs, approaches, numbers, instructional methods and materials that are just plain WRONG. Jim Cates is Director of the University of Texas Adult Performance Level Study

that brought the issue of functional illiteracy to the forefront of public attention. He has this to say about how the country has dealt with the problem through its programs, coalitions and federal initiatives:

> *We are hampered by a barn-raising mentality that looks for solutions akin to that of a simple gathering of hardy pioneers coming to the aid of a frontier neighbor in distress.*
>
> *Jim Cates (1985)*

So you want to help solve the illiteracy problem? Launch a literacy program. It's simple: those who can read will teach those who can't. Get the recipe from one of the national literacy groups and follow it. Use volunteers -- they're cheap. Basic resources such as space, books and staff will somehow take care of themselves. And forget about planning, resource development, experimenting with new ideas, training teachers so they can teach, working with students who are ready to learn -- there's no time or money for any of that.

One other thing you should do, particularly if you want to recruit volunteers -- ignore the reality that there is no "quick fix" for illiteracy. Reading is not the easy task literacy campaigns make it out to be. It is a complex, communication process that requires the reader to *bring meaning to* as well as *get meaning from* print.

The ability to process print relies heavily on spoken language development, which is closely related to conceptual development, background knowledge and familiarity with how words interact to make sense. Undereducated adults do communicate effectively in their personal environment, but their oral language and background experiences may not parallel those of the typical educated middle class American. Reading has not traditionally been a channel through which undereducated adults can acquire ideas, vocabulary and the broad historical, scientific, geographic and philosophical knowledge assumed by writers. Thus the undereducated adult often has a doubly difficult and time consuming task: learning the mechanical and organizational skills of the reading process, as well as acquiring the knowledge needed to bring meaning to the text.

It is a plain truth that those at the lower end of the literacy continuum -- non-readers and poor readers usually with life histories of failure in school and out --need a major investment of *their* time, a major supply of *teacher* time and skill, and a lot of hard work even to become marginally better at reading. That improvement will not automatically get them better jobs or keep them out of trouble, and no matter how long they work they simply will never read as well as you who are reading this now.

The curricula and materials are inappropriate. With armor clanking and lances up, the literacy crusaders have ridden into battle with equipment

and ideology right out of the middle ages of education. Like Don Quixotes, they have girded themselves with daydreams, theirs being story materials and learning techniques designed for children rather than for street-wise and country-smart adults.

> *The little research available on the teaching of adults in general and adult functional illiterates in particular clearly indicates that curricula are often ill-conceived and that instructional methods are too often appropriated from those developed for in-school use. ... There has been no central effort to define curricula for adult functional illiterates or to develop instructional approaches directly aimed at adult learners.*
>
> *Harman (1985)*

> *In adult education programs the curriculum is always remedial, always basic and always dealing in the kind of low status learning that middle class students would find insulting.*
>
> *Thomas (1983)*

Adults -- even low level students still struggling to sound out and recognize words -- want to read material that interests them. They want material with conflict, material that stresses emotions, material that allows them to reflect on their own lives or escape into other people's lives.

But where is such material found? Not in books designed to teach sound-symbol correspondence. Not in books designed for use by children. It does exist, but unless programs are willing to invest in a variety of materials from a variety of sources, and to search out some non-traditional materials as well, it will not be easily collected.

Unfortunately, most programs do not invest very much time or money in building a varied resource collection. What most voluntary and many ABE and prison programs do is to buy into a set of phonics-building materials, such as those published by Laubach's New Reader's Press. Much of the content is of the "this is a bird; this is a cup; this is a dish" order. Students are not challenged to think or feel, much less become inspired.

The assumptions about learners and their needs are unrealistic.
Although many ribbons and awards have been given out for reaching and touching the lives of adult illiterates, those who have passed through like knights errant have left very few able readers behind. It appears that neither they, -- nor, more importantly, the people who create the programs in the first place -- have taken time to talk to the learners and other adult illiterates themselves, to find out what it is adult illiterates want and need.

If they did they might hear some hard truths about people forced powerless and humiliated into a holding tank of illiteracy, public assistance and lack of self-respect; about people who see the traditional education system

(including adult education programs) as a conveyor belt that killed their hunger to learn, forced them to drop out to avoid further failure and dumped them into economic and personal nothingness; about people who hate traditional school settings, have no respect for teachers and see the school in the neighborhood as a prison; about people who don't have bus fare to get to a "tutoring" session, don't see a few gains in literacy as a way out of their situation, and in some cases may not see themselves as illiterate at all.

None of this picture fits the solutions that are being tried and talked about. Understandably, because the true picture is socially, economically and politically scary. It is far, far easier to put a million dollars here and there into coalitions, public awareness programs, conferences and status quo reading programs. It is far easier to believe that "to teach, all you need is a degree of caring," or to believe that if we can just let people know there's a cure for their problem -- all they need to do is come into a literacy or adult basic education program and ask -- the crusade will be well on its way to victory.

If illiterates were asked what they needed and wanted as a "solution" to their so-called problems -- if they were included in the testimony, the conferences and the boards of adult education and literacy programs -- the approaches that satisfy politicians, national literacy programs and "back to basics" educators would most likely join the history of the windmills.

VOICES CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS

One of the saddest and most frustrating things about the current attempts to deal with the "crisis of illiteracy" in this country is this: there are many educators, researchers, literacy activists and programs that paint a very different picture from the one above, but they have not been included in the "mainstream" national efforts.

In this excluded group are educators who say we must ask some hard questions about what literacy means, how it affects people, and how to provide it. There are researchers who have found examples of what works best in program design, instruction and materials. There are activists who think that volunteer work can take place at the courthouse, the school board meeting, the city council, the halls of Congress and the offices and boardrooms of corporations -- not just in a tutoring booth. There are programs that look outside their own classrooms into the social community and market economy that form the basis for their learner services, instruction and curriculum.

The next section of this paper explores some of the important assumptions underlying these alternative approaches.

TOWARD A DIFFERENT MODEL: ALTERNATIVE ASSUMPTIONS, APPROACHES AND SERVICES

We must address the underlying causes of illiterates' present situation and seek solutions that will make a difference to future generations. ... Priority should be placed on those educational programs that are immediately helpful to illiterate adults and (have an impact) on the larger social issues.

Harman and Hunter (1979)

CHALLENGING THE EMPHASIS

A literacy crusade such as the one currently being proposed to teach people to read makes sense only if we see *reading* as the basic need of adults presently left out or left behind in our society. The experience of a growing number of researchers, activists and program personnel suggest that for many adults it may not be.

The importance of helping networks. For example, Fingeret (1984), in studying nonreaders in their communities for a year, found a web of social relations around each of the illiterates she studied. Included in these relations were several "readers" of varying skill levels, with the "helper" being chosen by the degree of intimacy and skill that fit the need. Each of the participants in the study had at least one "reader" in his or her life.

Fingeret argues that "illiterate adults do not necessarily see themselves as dependent simply because they lack reading and writing skills." She also reminds us that adult educators ought to know from their experience, research, and review of the literature on adult illiteracy that "many illiterate adults are far from the stereotypical dependent, incompetent individuals associated with the term 'illiterate'."

Stephen Reder, in another significant study, also highlights the value of informal "literacy helping networks." Reder has found that helping networks exist in many different forms in most communities with significant numbers of nonreaders. In "Giving Literacy Away" (1985) Reder claims that these networks offer a key to attracting and keeping students in formal literacy programs. He also suggests that for the many nonreaders who will never want to participate in training programs the networks should be nurtured as an end in themselves.

Implications for programs. Programs wanting to provide formal literacy training have had little success in simply opening their doors and waiting for people to come in. They must reach out to where people are at -- to the local church, the headstart program, to tenants' groups and legal services offices, to the informal helping networks that may also exist. In reaching out, programs may find that in some areas there is less need for a formal literacy program than there is for a support mechanism that would reinforce and expand existing networks and helping services.

A "literacy support program" could then be set up. It should be in the form of a literacy resource and assistance center that would, first, address literacy-related needs, whatever they are. For example, "readers" could be available to help people decipher written material or thread their way through a bureaucratic maze. Second, the program would base its literacy training objectives on what people themselves believe they need (a class in W-2 forms preparation, drivers'examinations, parenting, job applications, etc.). And to extend the vision further, there would be a bookstore, a library, a PTA, a parent-child reading program, self-help groups -- it would be a literacy "place" that's more like a home.

A final point, but an important one: this would be a grassroots place where for every educator there is a social worker; where for every professional there are, say, six "literacy paraprofessionals" with a strong community background; and where volunteers are interested in more than drilling people to build encoding/decoding skills -- they're interested in the local hospital's current admission and consent processes, in the complexities of voter registration forms, in the neighborhood school's "special education" process for children with reading problems, and much, much more.

PLACING THE EMPHASIS ON LEARNER-CENTERED GOALS

Another cherished assumption of many traditional literacy programs is that the goal of literacy education should be to enable learners to jump successfully through a series of pre-determined hoops. But, as Harman and Hunter point out, "we must distinguish between external standards that define minimum literacy requirements for functioning in daily life, and internal standards people set for themselves which define their hopes, choices and ambitions." A successful literacy program must be based on respect for how learners see their world, respect for what they can contribute, and respect for what they may wish to learn (as opposed to what teachers may wish to teach).

A learner-centered emphasis has many implications for programs:

- It requires an approach that gives learners what they want and need. In many cases this requires great flexibility in program design-- for example in providing functional skills training focused

on the skills that learners want to develop. In some cases a more rigid curriculum may be warranted -- for example, in GED training.

- It requires an approach that is participatory rather than didactic, eclectic rather than pre-programmed. Learners must be included in the decision-making process. Let them teach and help each other where possible; help them to develop goals and strategies for meeting them, and to know and understand *their* world. Provide them materials that help them get where they want to go.

- It requires that teachers have a high degree of familiarity with the materials and techniques available to literacy education, and a willingness to experiment. It is unlikely that the average, unsupervised volunteer could successfully adopt such an approach: guidance is needed.

- It requires, above all, listening. Adults often know why they failed to learn in school, and they know what it is they need to know now. What they need most from a literacy program is help in working out strategies for obtaining their perceived goals.

Even the most flexible of programs and planners find themselves caught in the trap. Somehow, those of us who want to help are the ones who wind up defining the problem, identifying the target population and setting up the remedy, doing it all in terms that fit our own views of how the country works and how it ought to work. And then we wonder why we fail.

TWO BROAD PROGRAM TYPES

Fingeret, in a 1985 "Overview" paper, places the program implications of literacy assumptions into a useful framework, making a distinction between *individually oriented* programs and *community oriented* programs. (The term "community oriented" as Fingeret uses it is distinct from the term"community based" , which is a term so widely used and variously defined that it confuses more than it elucidates).

The distinctions between the two types of programs can be shown as follows:

	Individually Oriented	Community Oriented
Planning	Based on legislative mandate. tradition;	Based on community evaluation of wants & needs
Objectives	Teach reading; grade level advancement for individual	Situational and contextual; improvement in quality of life for the community
Evaluation	Grade levels attained; competencies gained; What can the program do better?	Affective change; anecdotal accounts of progress; What can you (the learners) do better?
Instructors	Credentialed or trained	Advocate, facilitator, change agent, resource person
Instruction	Generally top-down, instructor-learner, diagnostic/prescriptive	Generally lateral; holistic
Curriculum	Generally prescribed; pre-developed and commercially produced; skill oriented	Typically situational; program-developed; issue and problem oriented; often includes non-literacy components
Materials	Commercial skill books; level-oriented; workbooks; vocabulary building	Chosen or developed for content, context and meaning

Both individually and community oriented programs are concerned with empowering adults -- that is, assisting adults to develop a greater sense of control over their lives. Individually oriented programs focus on individual action for personal development, while community oriented programs advocate collective action for community development. Neither approach is, by definition, right or wrong. However, it appears that the community oriented approach offers greater potential to *make a significant difference.* Some reasons why include:

- Community oriented programs' links to the community and involvement of people from the community in teaching, administration and governance make the program seem more

comfortable, less threatening to students "turned off" by the school-like nature of ABE and other programs.

- Community oriented programs' emphasis on meeting a full range of learners' needs leads to more flexible, learner-oriented programming, with an emphasis on much-needed counseling support.

- Community oriented programs' emphasis on dealing with the person within the community environment allows more broadly constituted programs to take place -- parenting education, for example, and advocacy activities.

There is some evidence that community-oriented programs have more potential for serving adult learners -- particularly those at the lower end of the literacy continuum -- than school-based or tutorial programs. (See Hunter-Harman, 1979, 1985). However, there is also a potential for community oriented programs to become too flexible, too participatory and too eclectic to meet the needs of those learners seeking a credential such as the GED. It is up to each program to strike a balance between the two approaches, based on its own learners' needs.

REDEFINING THE PROBLEM

Some of the most interesting thinking in literacy comes from those who are willing to redefine the nature of the problem by asking some very hard questions. For example:

- Why do jobs that fundamentally involve manual labor, dexterity or organizational ability often reqire high school diplomas?

- Why do social workers send out long, wordy forms to people they know can't read them?

- How can the forms be written better?

- Who in the hospital or the police station or the courthouse wonders whether the people signing away their rights understand what they have done?

- What does "reading" really mean?

Asking these kinds of questions leads to very different solutions from those currently being proposed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Suppose we agree that simply teaching reading is not the solution to the complex problem of adult illiteracy; that community oriented programs tend to be more successful than individually oriented programs; that it may be helpful to throw out prior assumptions and look at the problem afresh. A basic question remains: what can and should be done?

It is beyond the scope of this paper to propose changes to the entire structure of literacy education, from job training and pre-GED programs at the high end of the litracy continuum to basic literacy programs at the low end, although I believe this is what may ultimately need to be done. The problem is that we simply don't have enough data yet to support sweeping and possibly revolutionary change, although some studies currently underway are likely to shed some light on the subject.

But this is not to say we can't do a great deal, right now. Here are four ideas which I believe hold tremendous promise.

1. PARENT-CHILD PROGRAMS TO HALT INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF ILLITERACY.

It's no secret. Children who grow up in a world of books and reading tend to become good readers; those who grow up without family support for reading do not. A supportive family setting not only gives the child the opportunity to develop reading skills, but gives reading a practical value and a deep social meaning. Children learn primarily through participating in challenging learning activities with those whom they love and admire most -- parents, grandparents, siblings. The children of illiterate parents are deprived of these activities, and do not learn to read.

What this means is that illiteracy perpetuates itself. To make a lasting impact on illiteracy we must reach the children as well as the parents. In fact, if we can reach only the children the problem will , over the long term, diminish.

But how do we reach the children? Through parents and other family members.

The idea of parent/child training programs isn't new. Twenty five years ago, in a book entitled *Slums and Suburbs,* James Conant capped some rather questionable observations with a concluding observation that was really quite visionary for the times:

No effort should be spared in slum areas to enlist the support of parents in the education of their children. To this end, adult education programs should be improved and expanded.
Conant (1961)

The National Commission on Excellence in Education, the Commission on Reading, the "A Nation at Risk" report all stress the importance of parents participating in their children's education, reading to their children, encouraging them to learn letters and words, taking them to the library. Secretary of Education Bennett echoed this theme in testifying to Congress, "Parental involvement and the informal curriculum of the home have got to play a part in promoting literacy."

But how do we get illiterate parents involved in reading to children, teaching through discussion, taking part in games or activities related to school work, creating learning materials for and with their children?

Motivation. The first hurdle -- motivation -- is in the case of parent-child programs surprisingly easy. A number of studies confirm that low-income and minority families are very much interested in the present education and future success of their children. Cross (1984), for example found in a five-state survey high aspirations for children among both high and low socioeconomic status parents and among both blacks and whites. Cross concluded that "lack of school success cannot generally be attributed to the notion that poor and minority parents do not value education."

Of course, generalized aspiration differs from specific motivation to come to a program, attend a class. But with a program designed to provide short-range gains, and specific do-able strategies, the transition from aspiration to motivation is not difficult.

Overcoming frustration. The second hurdle -- the frustration of parents who don't know what to do or how to do it -- can also be overcome. Existing adult education agencies and adult literacy programs could provide structured programs, materials, modeling techniques and other support services to educationally disadvantaged parents. The key is to set goals that are specific, realistic, short-term and tangible; get to the people that children most love and admire -- family members; support the already supportive family setting; and teach parents and other family members vigilance, participation strategies, the nuts and bolts of teaching first lessons, the strategies others have discovered for communicating with, nurturing and stimulating children.

Making it happen. Developing the programs requires dropping the campaign/crusade rhetoric of "turning illiteracy around", and focusing instead on "turning around" adult education and adult literacy policies, programs and priorities in the direction of parents and their children. In other words, we need to stop sloganeering and start providing the means

whereby parents (not professionals) can help themselves, their children and this nation become a nation of readers.

This won't be accomplished through coalitions, campaigns or traditional programs unless we first focus in at the grass roots and neighborhood level, where families are already members of informal reading networks and need to be tied into neighborhood literacy programs, libraries and schools and other community oriented organizations.

A true "even start". Nor will it be accomplished through legislation and funding of yet another broad-based fund-the-status-quo program approach such as the "Even Start" program now being proposed at the federal level. "Even Start" would authorize the funding of five to 20 projects for five years to train parents of two- to eight-year-old children. The projects -- pilot projects, they call them -- would be funded through the U.S. Department of Education and state departments of education at a cost of $1 million to $5 million. What's wrong with this approach is that it doesn't do what's needed to *give* a child an even start.

- An "even start" for the child of an illiterate parent starts when the mother (or other parent or grandparent or sibling or whomever) leaves the maternity ward of the hospital able to read the *low* level reading materials the hospital or the Red Cross provides on parenting. It starts when the mother rocks the six-month old baby and reads aloud as she rocks. It starts when the mother points out the parts of the body to the baby sitting in the bathtub, knowing that this may lead to better reading later.

- An "even start" starts when the mother knows where the local library is, gets a library card and checks out books; when she learns not to be intimidated by the library system, despite her own reading level; when she finds out when and where the children's programs are.

- An "even start" starts when the mother knows how to go into the local bookstore and select books that she and her child can read.

- An "even start" starts when the parent knows how his or her existing abilities and skills, no matter how low, can be put to use in working with a child that has not even begun yet to walk or talk.

- An "even start" continues when the parent knows how daycare, headstart pre-school and the public education system work; knows how to communicate with these systems; knows how to (at a minimum) read school notices, progress reports and report cards.

This is not a pie-in-the-sky idea that will cost millions. It doesn't need to be researched to death or monitored by government overseers and education professionals. It's being done now, by a few community-oriented literacy

groups, and it's proving to be a common-sense , practical way to use volunteers creatively, offer parents literacy training that will serve their immediate needs, and provide concrete, positive outcomes.

Funders such as B. Dalton Bookseller are paying attention to the idea of parent/child literacy, but much more attention is needed. If we do not steer America's literacy efforts in the direction of meeting the needs of children as well as adults, literacy programs will find that in 12-15 years they will have the children of today's parents knocking at their doors.

2. USE OF NETWORKS AND HELPING SERVICES

With the support of the findings of Fingeret, Reder and others regarding helping networks for adult illiterates, and with some further study of where and how these networks operate, perhaps much more help for educationally disadvantaged adults can be forthcoming through these networks. Certainly use of nonformal networks is an effort that ought to be encouraged and funded. Meanwhile, there are many helping services that can be provided using existing public and private community services, networks and opportunities.

> *Employers know which workers can't read; the emergency room staff knows whose children got the wrong medicine because the parent couldn't read the label; the welfare workers know why the forms don't get filled out right; and we (in literacy programs) know most of all. Yet most establishment people are forever telling us that more might be done if the illiterate were more visible. Now that, in the words of our students, is a truly hurtin' thing."*
>
> *Mike Fox,* The Ladder *(1983)*

The myth that illiterates are somehow invisible is simply not true. If we would just face up to the reality that we know exactly where the adult illiterates are, we could also very quickly begin to help them in a number of ways in their everyday situations. Every day the calls come in to literacy programs from courts, shelters for the homeless, vocational rehabilitation counselors, probation officers and even adult education teachers who haven't figured out how to help someone who needs individualized attention, and thus think the answer is "get a tutor and learn to read." But unless a person is ready to learn to read, and willing to devote a great deal of time and energy to the process, it probably won't happen. Thus:

- The vocational rehabilitation counselor that sends a client to get literacy training would do better putting the client into a job training program that doesn't require a particular literacy level.

- The managers and workers in entitlement programs that send their clients to learn to fill out the forms would do better to simplify the forms. It would take their clients five years or more to be able to fill out the college-level forms most programs supply.

Every literacy program, and every staff member or volunteer who has worked in literacy for at least six months, knows many ways in which the program itself or others might "make a readable difference." Here are just a few suggestions that literacy programs working with illiterate and low reading level populations should consider:

- Create self-help groups that could in turn become a helping service

- Use volunteers to walk people through the employment, school or community services maze. Don't require that people learn how to read well enough to walk it alone -- chances are that it's simply not going to happen.

- Use voter assistance volunteers to help the concerned, but illiterate, voter. Federal law allows voters to take the "reader" in their lives into the voting booth with them.

- Let parents whose children are having problems in school know that they are welcome to bring their problems to the literacy programs.

- Set up watchdog committees to monitor plain English, schools, job training programs, judicial services and community services.

- Have volunteer readers on call for those who find themselves in a sudden "literacy crisis".

- And above all, develop and advertise the existence of helping services. Let the community know that they're available, that short-term needs will be met, that a literacy program can be more than a group of tutors who are trained in the art of phonics and using their good hearts in unproductive ways.

An extension of the above is the idea of community/neighborhood information, testing, counselling and referral centers for the educationally disadvantaged. They are certainly an idea worth trying.

3. MAKING MATERIALS MORE READABLE

8,000 families in Washington D.C. receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) checks did not receive their checks in January. Two months previously they were asked -- by mail -- to fill

out a form that required the listing of children in "chronological order"; the reporting of the previous year's "accrued statutory benefits" and the returning of the form "to the Income and Maintenance Administration by the 10th day of the month after the month indicated above."

If millions and millions of Americans cannot read basic public materials -- tax forms, warnings on medicine bottles, memos on factory bulletin boards -- where should we look to remedy the problem? Illiteracy is determined, in part, by the level at which materials are written. A campaign to make public information more readable could be more effective than a massive literacy campaign in meeting people's immediate literacy needs.

There have been several efforts made to promote "plain" English, but they have been directed primarily toward improving materials used mainly by fully literate readers -- computer manuals, administrative memoranda, insurance policies and mortgages. Little has been done to make materials comprehensible to those reading below an eighth grade level. Moreover, research and innovation on readability have largely been restricted to the highest levels of academic and private enterprise.

Only those institutions able to afford prodigious consulting fees have had access to useful materials on readability. Communications design centers are beginning to appear which charge steep consultation fees for training and analysis in plain English design work. Any grass roots effort to promote plain English would be unable to afford the fees, and most government agencies would be unwilling to.

There have been some efforts by local businesses and agencies to look at the ways they are communicating with their consumers, clients and constituents. In the Washington D.C. area, for example, C&P Telehone Company has for the past three years tried to keep all its customer communications at a sixth grade reading level or lower.

But one has only to read the obfuscatory prose that most public agencies and corporate managers put out to realize that there's much more that needs to be done. Possible actions for literacy programs and other community based groups include:

Advocacy –

- Set up "watchdog" groups of volunteers to monitor public communications by government agencies, utilities, corporations, and other groups, and challenge the reading level of the materials -- in the courts, if necessary.

- Develop national/regional/local organizing strategies to draw attention and support to the issue.

•Solicit commitment by major public and private organizations to address readability in preparing their own materials

• "Tie in" with consumer organizations and other groups to promote demand for readability

Information and Training Services –

• Prepare and distribute guidelines that community groups can use for assessing, challenging and improving readability at the local level

• Hold training workshops for writers of public information and for community based education groups

• Provide computerized readability assessments and assistance in rewriting to CBOs, public agencies, businesses and individuals.

All of this could be accomplished through a national "write to read" program and campaign, patterned after other successful consumer campaigns.

4. ORGANIZING FOR A WORKING LITERACY

We recommend that the emerging coalitions of community-based organizations clarify and publicize their proposals for locally appropriate rsearch and action with respect both to the schools and to recurrent education for adults.

We further recommend that linkages between these local initiatives and larger political movements be consciously sought and intrpreted within democratic processes.

Finally, we recommend that those presently responsible for pubic policy and funding begin to enact legislation that both affirms the legitimacy of these movements and provides fiscal support for making democratic educational renewal a national priority.

Hunter & Harman (1985)

Hunter and Harman, in both their 1979 report *Adult Illiteracy in the United States* and their 1985 preface to the paperback edition point out the need for pluralistic, community based initiatives that would be action oriented, and would "increase the skills of community members to interact with and change the mainstream culture and its institutions." Hunter and Harman

also point out the need for coalition building and sharing of ideas among these too often isolated and ignored groups.

I would like to take this idea one step further and suggest bringing together a kind of national "think tank" of people who have asked the hard questions, faced the difficult answers squarely, and proved themselves willing to continue to work toward solutions that are feasible and practical -- a group made up of experienced educators and trainers, advocates and visionaries, along with learners. The group would work in the areas of policy formation, research, training and support services, advocacy and watchdog activities. It could serve as a resource to legislatures, corporations, funders and program people. There are many people whose opinions would prove valuable. Certainly those referred to in this paper are among them.

As a first step the group ought to be brought together for three days in a secluded atmosphere, with a top-notch facilitator, simply to discuss, sort out, plan and organize for a literacy effort that *works* -- works at the grassroots; works wihin organizations for personal and economic development; works within the prisons, within job-training programs, within other private and public sector initiatives.

There ought not be any apologies made for the intent to challenge traditional, status-quo approaches, or for the intent to develop alternatives to most of what has been in this country's literacy efforts. We have heard long enough that America needs to learn how to read and America will learn how to read if we just increase the number of voluntary programs and volunteers in our communities, workplaces, prisons and schools. There is another side to the story and it needs to be explored, talked about, written about and known if in fact we are going to succeed in "turning illiteracy around" in the United States.

REFERENCES

Adult Performance Level Study. (1977). Final report: The Adult Performance Level Study. Austin, TX: Author.

Cates, J. (1984). "Fed Initiative: National Force or Farce?" The Ladder. XII, May/June.

Conant, J. (1961). Slums and Suburbs. New York: McGraw Hill.

Cross, M., Ed. (1984). What you always wanted to know about research findings: Families as Educators. National Institute of Education, Reading and Language Studies Division.

Department of Education. (1986). The English Language Proficiency Survey. Washington, D.C.: Author.

Fingeret, A. (1984). Adult Literacy Education: Current and Future Directions. Columbus, OH: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career and Vocational Education. [ED 246 308].

Fox, M. (1982). "The Cost of Illiteracy" Washington Report. XVII, 3.

Harman, D. (1985, May). Turning Illiteracy Around: An agenda for national action. New York: Business Council for Effective Literacy.

Hunter, C., & Harman, D. (1979). Adult Illiteracy in the United States. New York: McGraw Hill. (Revised, 1985).

Lane, M. (1983). A summary of A Study of Volunteer Adult Basic Literacy Organizations in the United States and Canada by Mark F. Wurzbacher & Christine H. Yeannakis. Philadelphia: Lutheran Church Women.

Louis Harris and Associates, Inc. (1971). The 1971 National Reading Difficulty Index: A study of functional reading ability in the U.S. New York: Author.

McCune, D., & Alamprese, J. (1985, May). Turning Illiteracy Around: An agenda for national action. New York: Business Council for Effective Literacy.

McGrail, J. (1984). Adult Illiterates and Adult Illiteracy Programs: A summary of descriptive data. Columbus, OH: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career and Vocational Education. [ED 254 756].

Reder, S. (1985). Giving Literacy Away: Alternative strategies for increasing adult literacy development. Columbus, OH: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career and Vocational Education. [ED 253 775].

Thompson, J.L. (1983). "Adult Education and the Disadvantaged" Convergence. 16: 42-47.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Association for Community-Based Education. (1983). Adult Literacy: Study of community based literacy programs. Washington, D.C.: Author.

Kozol, J. (1985). Illiterate America. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press.

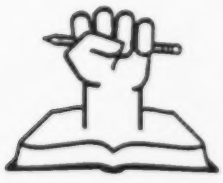
Lerche, R.S. (1985). Effective Adult Literacy Programs: A practitioner's guide. New York: Cambridge.

Mayer, S.E. (1984). Guidelines for Effective Adult Literacy Programs. B. Dalton Bookseller, National Literacy Initiative.

National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983, April). A Nation at Risk: The imperative for educational reform. Washington, D.C.: Author.

National Commission on Reading. (1985). Becoming a Nation of Readers: The report of the Commission on Reading. Washington, D.C.: Author.

PLAN, Inc. The Ladder. Published bi-monthly. Available by subscription. Washington, D.C.: Author.



Mike Fox has over 20 years' experience in community organizing, program planning, management, and teaching. Since the mid 60's he has worked extensively with non-profit grassroots groups, and for the past nine years has been executive director of Push Literacy Action Now (PLAN, Inc.), an adult literacy program in Washington, DC. He is editor of The Ladder, PLAN's national newsletter on literacy; a consultant to government and industry; and a nationally recognized, outspoken critic of the U.S. adult literacy effort.

Push Literacy Action Now (PLAN, Inc.) is a private, nonprofit, voluntary adult literacy program in the District of Columbia. Since 1972, PLAN has provided basic skills training to over 2,500 adults. The agency maintains offices, classrooms and a resource center at 1332 and 1328 G Street, in the Southeast section of the city.

In 1984, the National Adult Literacy Project--a federally funded survey of 225 literacy programs throughout the nation--cited PLAN as 1 of 31 "outstanding adult literacy programs."

PLAN's goals are both individual--centered on providing training to meet the literacy and human development needs of individual learners--and societal--centered on action to change the conditions that cause and perpetuate illiteracy. In addition to its general literacy program, PLAN's activities include advocacy for plain English, job-site literacy training, curriculum development, literacy "helping" services, and a special "literacy for parenting" program.